

Charles Coughlin, 30's 'Radio Priest,' Dies

BLOOMFIELD HILLS, Mich., Oct. 27 (UPI) — The Rev. Charles E. Coughlin, the "radio priest" of the Depression who was ultimately silenced by the hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church, died today at his home in suburban Detroit. He was 88 years old.

Father Coughlin had been bedridden and in ill health for several weeks. A funeral mass was scheduled for Tuesday at the Shrine of the Little Flower in Royal Oak, the church where he served as pastor from 1926 until his retirement in 1966.

Fiery Sermons Stirred Furor

By ALBIN KREBS

The Great Depression of the 1930's spawned many fiery preachers who played upon the emotions of a distraught and fearful American populace, but none was more revered by his followers and loathed by his opponents than the Rev. Charles Edward Coughlin.

Father Coughlin, known as "the radio priest," started as pastor of a tiny parish in Royal Oak, Mich., but in time he commanded a weekly radio audience of 40 million who hung on his every richly enunciated word.

Thunderously warning against what he considered the multiple evils of Communism, capitalism, labor unions, Wall Street, "the international money-changers in the temple," and dozens of other targets, Father Coughlin, in a short time, made himself a political power.

Courted by Politicians

Politicians sought to stay in the good graces of the man who could, with a few words, produce an avalanche of Congressional mail. Even President Franklin D. Roosevelt, at first the recipient of Father Coughlin's glowing blessings, courted his favor. But the priest later excoriated Mr. Roosevelt as "anti-God" and, in 1936, ran his own Presidential candidate.

Gradually, Father Coughlin's sermons and his weekly magazine, Social Justice, which had a circulation of a million, became instruments of anti-Semitism. Units of the Christian Front organization, which he supported, made raids on Jewish institutions and businesses. The mere mention of his name at rallies of the pro-Nazi German-American Bund touched off wild cheering. "I take the road of Fascism," he said in 1936.

It was not until after the United States entered World War II — a move he opposed — that Father Coughlin's radio voice was finally silenced, and his magazine forced out of business, by the efforts of the Roman Catholic Church and the Federal Government.

Charles Edward Coughlin was born Oct. 25, 1891, the son of an Indiana-born Great Lakes seaman, Thomas Coughlin, who married Amelia Mahoney, a Canadian, and settled in Hamilton, Ontario. At the University of Toronto, Charles Coughlin studied theology at St. Michael's College, run by the Basilian Order, which emphasized the doctrines of the "social church" and economic justice.

Taught at Canadian College

In 1926, after he taught for 10 years at Assumption College in Windsor, Ontario, Father Coughlin was transferred to the Diocese of Detroit.

A few weeks after he took over the 50-family parish in Royal Oak, a Detroit suburb, the Ku Klux Klan burned a cross in the churchyard. Bewildered by such hatred, he later recalled, he went to station WJR in Detroit and proposed that he be given air time each Sunday to explain Catholicism to the community.

His first broadcast, from the altar of his church, the Shrine of the Little Flower, drew five letters. Out the response grew, and by 1929 stations in Cincinnati and Chicago were carrying the program. A League of the Little Flower was formed and listeners sent in thousands of contributions weekly, most in sums no larger than a dollar.

Later, with \$1 million in contributions, Father Coughlin built a new Shrine of the Little Flower that, with its seven-story tower and huge figure of Christ stretched across one side, remains a tourist attraction.

Until 1930, Father Coughlin restricted his homilies to religious subjects. But by the fall of that year America was beset by poverty and seething with unrest, and with his Oct. 30 broadcast Father Coughlin started giving his listeners the scapegoats that many seemed to want.

Communists First Target

His first targets were the Communists. "Choose today!" he intoned. "It is either Christ or the Red Fog of Communism!"

Father Coughlin's success was almost



The Rev. Charles E. Coughlin in a photograph made about 1935

instant. Within six months, his talks were carried every Sunday at 3 P.M. on an 18-station CBS hookup. Neighbors gathered in homes with radios to listen to the voice warmed by a slight Irish brogue, rich and reassuring on the one hand, shrieking and terrifying on the other.

"The most dangerous Communist," he said in one broadcast, "is the wolf in sheep's clothing of conservatism who is bent upon preserving the policies of greed." The "wolves," he explained, included Herbert Hoover, the Morgans, "every money-changer in Wall Street."

But the priest could, without changing pace, say: "I oppose modern capitalism because by its very nature it cannot and will not function for the common good. In fact, it is a detriment to civilization."

Coined Roosevelt Slogan

In 1932, coining the slogan "Roosevelt or Ruin," Father Coughlin climbed on the Roosevelt bandwagon. Mr. Roosevelt welcomed his support, and the President and the priest lunched several times.

The priest moved rapidly away from the New Deal, however, and toward isolationism and anti-unionism. In 1934 he organized the National Union for Social Justice, a supposedly nonpolitical lobby.

As the 1936 election approached, Father Coughlin became even more widely feared and hated. Protests had persuaded CBS to drop his program, but he put together his own network of 29 stations, soon expanded to 36. All the while, Bishop Michael J. Gallagher, his superior, continued to defend the priest from attacks by fellow Catholics.

Father Coughlin founded the magazine Social Justice in 1936 to propound the principles of the National Union for Social Justice, which included nationalization of certain resources, abolition of private banking and a central Government bank that would control prices and the value of money.

And on June 19, 1936, Father Coughlin announced to his radio audience that he had formed his own Union Party, with William Lemke, a Representative from North Dakota, as its Presidential candidate. He was soon joined by the remnants of Huey P. Long's Share-the-Wealth movement and by Dr. Francis E. Townsend's would-be pensioners, who sought Government payments of \$200 a month for everyone over the age of 65.

Father Coughlin predicted that "Liberty Bill" Lemke would get at least nine million votes and vowed that if he did not, he would consider it a personal rebuke and go off the air forever.

Mr. Lemke received about a million votes as Mr. Roosevelt defeated Alfred M. Landon by a landslide, and Father Coughlin kept his promise to go off the air. "Forever" lasted about seven weeks.

Soon after Father Coughlin went back on the air, the Bishop of Detroit died, and his successor, Archbishop Edward Mooney, later a Cardinal, rebuked the priest for his attacks on labor and the New Deal and his friendly references to Hitler and Mussolini.

Rome also spoke: "The Holy See regards as just and timely the correction which the Archbishop of Detroit made in reference to the remarks of Father Coughlin."

Increasingly Anti-Semitic

Still, his broadcasts and his magazine became increasingly anti-Semitic. The magazine even published the "Protocols

of the Elders of Zion," a forgery purporting to describe a Jewish plot of world takeover.

In several cities, swastikas were painted on the doors of Jewish businesses and on tombstones by what were called Coughlin storm troopers, drawn from the ranks of the Coughlin-supported Christian Front. Vendors of Social Justice picked fights with Jews in New York, often ganging up on a single person, beating him up and getting away.

After Pearl Harbor, Father Coughlin continued for a time to be the center of nationalist, isolationist, pro-Nazi groups, saying that the war had been caused by a British-Jewish-Roosevelt conspiracy.

But, under church pressure, Father Coughlin was forced to stop his radio programs, which, in wartime, had become clearly divisive. Then the Government moved to squelch Social Justice. Attorney General Francis Biddle charged the magazine with giving aid and comfort to the enemy, and at the same time the Post Office Department barred it from the mails. It was forced out of business.

Silence on Politics

On orders of church superiors, Father Coughlin no longer mentioned political subjects. Finally, he was once again simply the pastor of the Shrine of the Little Flower, and in time his enemies no longer referred to the church as the Shrine of the Little Führer.

Father Coughlin retired from his pulpit in Royal Oak in 1966 and built a home in nearby Birmingham, Mich. Though quiet most of the time, he kept writing pamphlets and tracts denouncing Communism and Ecumenical Council Vatican II.

In a telephone interview on his 77th birthday, in a voice mellowed with age but still vibrant with opinion, he said he "couldn't honestly take back much of what I said and did in the old days when people still listened to me."

"The press ignored it at the time," he said, "but the real reason I couldn't take any more of Roosevelt was because he recognized the atheistic, godless government of the Communists in Russia."

As for his silencing after the start of the war, Father Coughlin said: "I could have bucked the Government and won — the people would have supported me. But I didn't have the heart left, for my church had spoken. It was my duty to follow, for disobedience is a great sin."



Associated Press

Father Coughlin in 1962